**K-12 Choice-Favoring and Public-Favoring Stories**

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**Abstract** (75 words)

This article focuses on how language favoring educational choice shapes U.S. educational policy. We outline key features of some dominant narratives, providing several examples and showing how these stories contradict accumulating empirical realities and are often tied to conceptions of "schooling as business." We then describe emergent narratives which support and envision a strong, broadly supported public education system. Finally, we discuss what lies ahead amid continued, evolving efforts by some to privatize public resources.

**Keywords:** *education policy; language; advocacy; policy influence; privatization; markets*

**Language Matters: K-12 Choice-Favoring and Public-Favoring Stories**

This article is based on the understanding that the language we use, the stories we tell, matter. Language shapes the ways we think and feel about ourselves and others, institutions such as our schools and (more generally) about our world. As applied to education policy, it matters whether our nation's public schools are described as such, or if instead they are framed as "failing government schools," like they were by President Trump in his 2020 State of the Union address. Accepting this truth about the power of language holds many implications. So what happens when language is used to build up narratives that contradict accumulating evidence? Can language reconfigure our perceptions of schools in ways that re-orient their purpose? More specifically, we assert that disparaging language about our schools unhelpfully limits our policy imaginations. Likewise, we show how casting schools as "businesses" — and parents as "customers" — shapes commonsensical assumptions about the purposes of public schools, but ignores much of the research evidence about how public schools function.

This article focuses on how language and stories around school choice shape United States (U.S.) educational policy. Although this essay does not comprehensively review empirical results, it does arise from our collective confrontation with this question: *Why have school choice policies/programs, in spite of meager evidence supporting their efficacy, accelerated and diversified in recent years?* Indeed, this focus on language reflects our agreement that it is fundamental to making sense of this situation. Over and above the empirical findings are the perpetual, evolving struggles to linguistically (re)define and (re)frame policy problems and solutions (Malin, Hardy, & Lubienski, 2019; Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2016). Ultimately, language can be powerful in framing perceptions, and in this context can set the terms for our policy-related discussions and decisions. Of course, such language can be biased, and so in this

essay we provide examples of opinions that we argue have been important in framing larger narratives related to market-based and business-like reform approaches. We believe it is crucial that stakeholders understand the contours of these narratives.

Accordingly, first we outline the key features of some dominant narratives. Particularly, we show how these stories are frequently tied to conceptions of "schooling as business." We then describe emergent and alternative narratives which, at their core, invariably support and envision a strong, affirming, broadly supported public education system. Finally, we conclude with a discussion about what lies ahead for educational policies and policy advocacy amid continued, evolving efforts by some policymakers and advocates to promote efforts that privatize public resources. We consider how the language and imagery of business affects developing narratives and sensemaking regarding education reforms. Our examination is significant for teachers, educational leaders, parents, community stakeholders, and education advocates who should be aware of these dominant discourses and be prepared to critically consider policies that reproduce inequities.

## Background

The politics of U.S. education are inescapably conflictual, and at the crux are battles to frame problems and solutions in moral terms. In short, educational problems and solutions are continuously debated in various forms, frequently through the media (Malin, Lubienski, & Mensa-Bonsu, 2020; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Accordingly, it is helpful and accurate to understand educational policies as being actively constructed, arising out of particular, popular "framings" more so than from actual problems being addressed by policymakers (Horsford, Scott, & Anderson, 2019).

Policymakers and policy influencers work to shape policies and programs, and are also interested in directing public opinion toward particular aims. Some actors have done so with impressive resourcing, sophistication, and coordination. Conservatives have been notably adept at this (Leonard, 2019). For example, Lakoff (see 2010a, 2010b) suggests that the "conservative communication system" (2010b, Para. 14) is particularly well developed and has accordingly been more successful at both shaping public opinion and securing preferred policy goals. This system:

> consists of a prior understanding of the conservative moral system, dozens of think tanks working from that system, talented framing professionals, training institutes that train tens of thousands of conservatives a year to think and talk from a radical conservative perspective, a system of trained spokespeople, and booking agencies to book their spokespeople on radio, TV, and in venues like civic groups, colleges, corporations, etc… (Lakoff, 2010b, Para. 14)

As applied to education, this system has largely (and, it would appear, successfully) focused on advocating for educational privatization. For example, in 2004 President George W. Bush's Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, compared the National Education Association to a terrorist organization and, although he later regretted this choice of words, he maintained his position that the union was fighting "against bringing real, rock-solid improvements in the way we educate all our children, regardless of skin color, accent or where they live" (Pear, 2004, Para. 15). More recently, President Trump, during his inaugural address, called public schools part of an "American carnage" (Strauss, 2018, Para. 6). President Trump's Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, actively promotes the view that there is no such thing as public money; rather, every person should be free to spend *their* tax dollars according to their own preferences (Strauss, 2019). Here, DeVos is referring to various versions of private school tax credit scholarship programs, also known as "neovouchers" (Welner, 2008), wherein families can direct their tax

dollars, and receive a credit back, to organizations that then provide money for private school tuition.

Per Lakoff's (2010a, 2010b) explanation, the communication system matters. In other words, words matter. It matters when our leaders frame school systems as carnage and their employees' unions as terroristic. It matters that privatization advocates, including President Trump, seek to denigrate public schools as "government schools." Consequently, one of the main remedies for the government "monopoly" on public education tax dollars involves framing schools as businesses that should succeed or fail based on their popularity with choosers. It also matters if individuals highlight stories of poor or minority families and use language that describes students as "trapped" in monopolistic state schools, precluded from exercising a consumer-style right to choose a private school.

Still, despite the power of dominant stories and frames about the perils of public education, individuals and leaders in schools and other communities can (and do) challenge this communication system, asserting their own truths regarding public education's past, present, and future. Abowitz and Stitzlein (2018), for example, argue against privatization efforts in public education by stressing the importance of moving beyond individual considerations for schooling and prioritizing collective civic responsibilities. And David Labaree (2000) has noted there is no escaping the public-good aspects of public education, despite efforts to privatize the system.

**Choice-Favoring Stories**

School choice-favoring stories have long been ubiquitous, a product of many factors including efforts by private and government funders to highlight the opportunities of school choice. As one example, the Black Alliance for Educational Options' (BAEO) grant from the Bush Administration and the Gates Foundation sought "to develop an intense public information

campaign to reach parents about the choices available to them" (Aspey & Williams, 2002, as cited in Lasdon & Evenskaas, 2003, p. 3). The campaign included television spots on families utilizing choice. As described by Lasdon and Evenkaas (2003):

> BAEO bills itself as a coalition of up-and-coming leaders working within the African-American community. But a closer look shows that BAEO has been bankrolled by a small number of right-wing foundations better known for supporting education privatization and affirmative action rollbacks than empowerment of the African American community or low-income families. (Lasdon & Evenkaas, p. 4)

Though numerous stories are possible and numerous variations of choice policies have been proposed and enacted, the most frequent and consistent underpinning moral/ethical claims have revolved around "establishing or touting the virtue of *choice* (or related, *freedom* or *liberty*) and how it could be expanded via these reforms" (Malin *et al.*, 2019, p. 8). Such claims have tended to emphasize how choice programs did/could benefit historically marginalized groups. For example, as President Trump stated, "I want every single inner city child in America who is today trapped in a failing school to have the freedom — the civil right — to attend the school of their choice" (as cited in Brown, 2016, Para. 8). Choice proponents have also increasingly framed advocacy more broadly, emphasizing how choice programming should be opened up to *all* or most families. Education Secretary DeVos, for instance, has championed access to an array of "educational options," including "any kind of choice that hasn't yet been thought of" (Tripp Scott Florida, 2015). Closely tied is the notion that government bureaucrats do not have children's interests at heart, but that "parents know best" — and, thus, we "have an obligation to put parents in charge and provide every child with the chance to reach their full potential" (DeVos, 2017, Para. 3).

Such an approach appears then to reflect a foot-in-the-door strategy, forerunning and supporting substantial voucher- and voucher-like program expansions and attempted expansions

in various states (see, for example, Nevada's AB 165, Arizona's ARS § 43-1089; Malin *et al.*, 2020). Also, one can now see how this strategy paved the way for a federal agenda that aims to expand the "market" of education, led by DeVos.

Ultimately, the "free market" is frequently held up as being *virtuous in and of itself*, and as such we need to trust in it, open it up (Malin *et al*., 2019). Such a market-favoring position toward education is often juxtaposed against claims of an inherently slow, stiflingly bureaucratized, risk-averse public system.

Such stories and moral appeals, again, appear to have been successful, tapping into attacks and myths that created a story about organizational failure in U.S. schools — an empirically false, manufactured crisis in public schooling (see Berliner & Biddle, 1995). These stories also tap into deep frames related to freedom and a particular conception of parenting and individual liberty (Lakoff, 2014). These stories arguably have supplied an ideological end-around given accumulating negative empirical realities regarding many of the recommended programs (Lubienski & Malin, 2019). While there have been multiple motivations for choice-driven policies — including efficacy, equity, privatization, and personal liberty — advocacy for the policies themselves has been ever-evolving, as can be seen in shifts in focus from *choice for some* to *choice for all* (Malin et al., 2019), or from c*hoice for school improvement* to *choice for its own sake*. In this regard, we have also witnessed and here describe and exemplify a particular framing that has become increasingly conspicuous: if families are consumers, then it makes sense to portray schooling as a business.

Increasingly, schools are being asked to compete for "customers," and are adopting corporate structures and practices, such as marketing campaigns and CEOs. The education reform movement in particular — funded by philanthropists who made their fortunes in the

business world and apparently see that model as the solution to public education's woes — is steadily more dependent on the business consultancy sector, and is adopting much of the lingo, assumptions, and canons of the business world, such as Jim Collins' ideas on improving businesses (Lubienski, 2019; Russakoff, 2015).

**Public-Favoring Stories**

Compelling "public-favoring" educational stories are also told, and these too have flowed from a clear vision and made moral claims. Invariably, public-favoring educational stories have been consistent with a progressive vision, adhering to particular principles. Accordingly, it is helpful to consider and exemplify a small set of "public-favoring stories" relative to dominant progressive frames and principles.

The basic progressive vision is of *community*, of "America as family, a caring, responsible family" (Lakoff, 2014, p. 137). Core progressive values — *caring* and *mutual responsibility* — flow from this vision. Arising from these values are political principles such as equity, equality, democracy, and government for a better future. A "stronger America," in the progressive vision, requires more than defense: it includes every dimension, including our educational system. The primary goal is to bring about "broad prosperity" — "a better future for all Americans" (Lakoff, 2014, pp. 140-141).

Progressives can agree on basic policy directions, if not always on specifics. With respect to education, the following basic policy direction is described as agreeable to many:

> A vibrant, well-funded, and expanding public education system, with the highest standards for every child and school, where teachers nurture children's minds and often the children themselves, and where children are taught the truth about their nation — its wonders and blemishes. (Lakoff, 2014, p. 140)

We view the above as enumerating certain core elements that those who favor a strong public education system must build upon. Educationalists can and should often go further — for

instance, fleshing out specifics — but we believe their success as advocates will largely hinge upon the ability to connect the stories they tell with this deeper vision, and the values and principles associated with it.

Studying educational advocacy, we have come across many such arguments, and here we present and briefly analyze a few examples. Scholar Linda Darling-Hammond (2017), for *The Nation*, provides one such example:

> At the end of the day, the public welfare is best served when investments in schools enable all young people to become responsible citizens prepared to participate effectively in the political, social, and economic life of their democracy. As John Dewey wrote in *The School and Society*, 'What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy…. Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.' (n.p.)

Ultimately, though, it may be direct K-12 stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, principals, superintendents) who can most forcefully and persuasively present public-favoring stories:

> [T]he attention DeVos has drawn creates an opening to reclaim the language, values, and priorities of public education. In a moment when federal and state policy is in flux and when people are actively considering the role of education within our democracy, we should look to those inside our schools — students, parents, teachers, and staff — to define and lead the movement. (Murphy, 2017, n.p.)

Indeed — and this movement is well underway. In 2019, the Kentucky House majority leader sponsored bill HB 205 that would, if successful, create a scholarship tax credit program for private schools. Though the bill did not pass, debates revealed deep tensions between education reform proponents in Kentucky and the state's public school teachers and leaders. A large group consisting of superintendents came together to oppose and sharply criticize the bill on social media and via multiple urgent news press gatherings (McClaren, 2019). At one meeting, Marty

Pollio, Superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools, explained why he felt that tax credit programs are bad for public schools:

> In no time in my career other than now have we seen a time where kids need more supports and services than…now. So we are all superintendents trying to meet the needs of our students. Recently, we have made a major commitment to mental health practitioners in our schools and I know many of our districts are looking to do the same, more wrap-around services, more interventions for students to get them to where they need to be… and just looking at Senate Bill 1, for example. When there is part of that language that we would provide counselors at a rate of 250 students per counselor. The cost of that, to increase that, when right now many of our districts, high schools especially, are 4 and 500 to one… we are talking about a significant increase in counselling services, rightfully so, for our students. But we also have to have the funding and the mechanism to do that. So I think we're sitting here together in unity because we want to give those services to our students. (Boliaux, 2019, 1:31)

Superintendent Pollio highlighted why he believes that the movement of taxes in the direction of private schools is really bad for public schools. His position underscores the need to adequately and, even better, generously fund public education to provide all students with the best services possible. Tax credit programs for private schooling exacerbate their funding concerns. Overall, during the lead-up to the presentation of this proposed bill, school teachers, leaders, researchers, and community activists also spoke out to consider the data-based consequences of voucher-like programs (see Potterton, 2019). HB 205 legislation failed (EdChoice, 2019).

In Arizona, passionate members of an institution and community organizing group work with leaders throughout the state to educate, strategize, and develop capacities of schools, nonprofit organizations, unions, and churches to work toward socially-just changes (Potterton, 2018). Members held house meetings to organize around education funding issues, they organized strategy meetings to encourage policymakers and legislators in regard to their duty to serve the public, and they worked to challenge local stakeholders about Arizona's long-standing market-based education system (Potterton, 2018). At one gathering, a leader asked, "How do we 'reframe' the story of what is happening in Arizona? Since a narrative is being told for us, it is

our job to critically evaluate political, economic, and cultural power and learn how to retell our story." He then explained:

> You need a civic society to teach people how to function in a healthy market. With individualism at [the] forefront of school and churches, we won't have a healthy market — not based on trust, but based on winning and losing.

He asked this question to the group: "What is the narrative for Arizona?" (Potterton, 2018).

And so, in a similar spirit, in this essay we ask teachers, school leaders, parents, and other education advocates — what is the narrative for the United States?

## Looking Forward

There is little doubt that we are seeing an increasingly blurry line between what is public and what is private in public education. It is reasonable to understand how, based on our assessment of powerful language that is used and actions that sometimes follow, some reforms are being made to explicitly blur those lines through the use of business models that appear to bring the language of individual liberty to public education. At the beginning of this article we asked, "So what happens when language is used to build up narratives that contradict empirical evidence?" As researchers Berliner and Biddle (1995) showed in *The Manufactured Crisis*, "When one actually examines the evidence, one discovers that it simply will not support the fiction that America has a generally failing system of education. This claim is nonsense" (p. 6). That was more than 20 years ago. Yet, the fictional language that was used then is similar to some words we hear today about schools-as-businesses, and market-based approaches to schooling being the way to fix the education crisis…or, in President Trump's portrayal, the "carnage." Regarding this language and imagery, for educational leaders and community stakeholders, we encourage vigilant critical analyses of the language used regarding education,

and deep consideration of the systems and context surrounding that language. After all, words matter, they can indeed hurt, and they can lead to policies that further exacerbate inequities.

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